

The Clerical Foundation of a Call Center Service Delivery System

CHRISTINE CRAVER

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Summary

A Call Center service model is a creative approach to developing a new efficient delivery system for human service agencies. This centralized model improves client service; at the same time, this type of service delivery model creates large volumes of material that must be processed in a timely manner.

Much emphasis has been placed on Case Maintenance and Customer Care worker responsibilities and roles. Little attention is given to the clerical or office support role in a Call Center service delivery system. Increased focus on clerical's role may be key to improving Call Center processes, costs and workflow. This paper addresses major challenges clerical staff must face to meet the demands of a Call Center environment. Ideas to meet these challenges are also posed to open discourse within individual departments and counties.

Findings

Clerical plays a vital role in processing and tracking the large volume of documents in a centralized Call Center system. Many clerical tasks are performed manually, requiring a large pool of clerical staff for document processing, adding to Call Center costs.

Counties are continuing to struggle with the challenge of tracking, monitoring and completing high volumes of calls and tasks. A closer examination of the clerical role is the key to finding solutions to the challenges facing Call Center models.

Summary of Recommendations

- Create a task monitoring and management reporting tool.
- Mail merge renewal packet documents.
- Create a hybrid clerical/worker classification.
- Barcode forms for imaging systems.

Christine Craver is a Clerical Supervisor with Contra Costa County's Employment & Human Services Department.

The Clerical Foundation of a Call Center Service Delivery System

CHRISTINE CRAVER

Introduction

Call Centers are a relatively new delivery system for processing continuing Medi-Cal and Non-Assistance Food Stamp cases. Counties have developed different workflow approaches to this type of service delivery model. In each approach, it is clear that the role of clerical staff is the foundation to an efficient and effective workflow process.

A Call Center model allows a more efficient service delivery for the client and is cost-effective for counties. This is the mantra of Call Center proponents. However, is it more efficient and cost-effective? After examining the clerical role in a Call Center model in San Mateo and Contra Costa counties, I found the current model is less cost-effective than that of a traditional service delivery system. Call Center clerical models are labor-intensive.

It takes approximately twice as many clerical staff to support a Call Center environment. Many clerical tasks are completed manually, leaving the Call Center vulnerable to clerical error and unnecessary processing delays.

Creative and innovative solutions are needed to automate clerical tasks and streamline clerical processes, ultimately creating a more efficient and cost-effective service delivery model.

Call Center Overview

A Call Center model uses a centralized process to streamline delivery of services to clients. Outcomes expected of a Call Center environment include:

- Faster response time for client inquiries;
- Continual workload coverage; and
- Procedure and process consistency¹

All cases reside in “Banked” caseload in the CalWORKS Info Network (CalWIN), which is an automated eligibility system. Phone workers answer and handle client inquiries that can be completed quickly. Case maintenance workers perform case management duties and handle any issues that will take more time to complete. Cases are transferred to and from the “Banked” caseload after each transaction is completed. Clerical staff clear, track, log, file, scan, index, and deliver mail. Cover letters and redetermination packets are also prepared by clerical staff.

Call Center Clerical Process

Call Center clerical workflows can be organized in various ways. San Mateo and Contra Costa counties’ workflows are similar when initially processing incoming mail. The most common documents/forms received by a Medi-Cal and Food Stamp Call Center are Medi-Cal Redeterminations, Food Stamp Recertifications, Food Stamp Quarterly Reports, and Verifications. All mail received is date stamped, sorted, logged and assigned to workers by clerical staff.

The major workflow difference between Contra Costa and San Mateo counties is the point at which documents are scanned and indexed. Contra Costa

¹Jimenez, Diana, Medi-Cal Telephone Call Centers: A Way Of The Future? Executive Summary, Participants’ Case Studies, Class of 2005, p. 211.

County scans and indexes soon after the document is received. San Mateo County Benefit Analysts process each Redetermination and send it to be imaged after completed.

Clerical workflows differ, but both counties process documents in a similar manner. Many clerical processes are manually completed. Both counties are using the same manual methods to open mail, process packets and track documents. These methods are both time-consuming and inefficient.

Approximately, one thousand documents are received daily and processed by clerical staff at a typical Call Center. Eligibility workers handle six to eight thousand calls on a monthly basis.² Every document, including those created by client calls, is date stamped, cleared, case commented in CalWIN, scanned and indexed, filed for assignment. Cases are assigned, transferred and tracked by clerical staff.

Once a document is assigned to an Eligibility Worker (Contra Costa County) or a Benefit Analyst (San Mateo County), it becomes a task. Multiple documents can be considered one task depending on the county's specific definition of a task. For example, a Benefit Analyst or Eligibility Worker is assigned a Recertification. Verifications necessary to process the Recertification would be forwarded to the worker of record and not counted as a separate task.

Alternatively, each incoming document can be considered a separate task. For example, a Recertification is assigned to a worker. Verification is received for the same case and is assigned to another worker. Each is considered a separate task. The workers do the necessary steps to complete each task.

In San Mateo and Contra Costa County, it takes approximately two to three times the number of clerical staff to maintain a Call Center than a traditional model.

Traditionally, the ratio of clerical to eligibility worker is 1:10; one clerk supports 10 workers. In San

Mateo, the ratio of office support is approximately 1:3 and in Contra Costa, the ratio is 1:5.³

Since office support is partially funded by a county's general fund, it is vital to examine the clerical role in a Call Center service model and mitigate clerical costs. One way to moderate these costs is to change the funding from administration overhead to Medi-Cal funding based on the type of work clerical or office support does. However, to reduce office support staff, we must develop ways to automate manual clerical processes.

Manual Renewal Packet Process

Clerical staff process over 2,200 Medi-Cal Redetermination (RV) packets monthly in Contra Costa County. A Redetermination packet consists of a Medi-Cal Annual Redetermination form (MC 210 RV), Medi-Cal Property Supplement form (MC 210 PS), Medi-Cal Statement of Facts and various informational materials. San Mateo mails approximately 1,800 packets a month.⁴ The current labor-intensive renewal packet process for both counties is as follows:

- Counties extract client information from the CalWIN Information Server (CIS)⁵ database through Business Object Systems.
- Client names and addresses are mail merged with the Medi-Cal redetermination packet cover letter, then printed.
- A label is manually added to the blank MC 210 RV with the client's name and case number. This is done to identify the case when the MC 210 RV is returned to the Call Center.
- Clerical staff then collate the cover letter and MC 210 RV by hand.
- In Contra Costa County, staff insert the cover letter and MC 210 RV in the renewal packet and mail to client.
- In San Mateo County, Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VHS) staff put the packets together and coordinate mailing.

²Contra Costa, totals based on mail counts and Intelleg Reports and Borland, D., Maureen, Director, Human Services Agency "Human Services Agency Health Insurance TeleCenter Update" San Mateo Memo, 05-19-04.

³Phone Directories from San Mateo and Contra Costa Counties.

⁴Borland, D., Maureen, 05-19-04.

⁵CalWIN stores data in CIS database

Manual processing of this task is labor-intensive. In Contra Costa and San Mateo, it takes two days to complete the current renewal packet process. San Mateo assigns this task to their Lead Office Assistant. Contra Costa uses a full-time clerk to process Medi-Cal packets, and additional staff are pulled from other duties to assist in this process.

The mundane task of manually collating over 2,200 cover letters with the MC 210 RVs creates an environment for clerical error. An example of this would be clients receiving a cover letter that was meant for another client. An error of this type violates clients' confidentiality rights and may have legal ramifications. It is imperative to automate this task to ensure an accurate process.

Possible Solution

A method for automating this process would be to collate the MC 210 RV and cover letter using Microsoft Office's Word mail merge function. The steps for this task would include:

- Create a Word file containing the cover letter and MC 210 RV;
- Add appropriate merge fields in each document;
- Mail merge; and
- Send file to a copier that collates and staples documents.

It would take approximately 15 minutes instead of two days to extract client information, mail merge, and send the file to a copier. Clerical error could be eliminated by automating this process.

The main barrier to mail merging is the availability of a writable, Microsoft Word, MC 210 RV version. Because of security concerns, the California Department of Health Services (DHS) and California Department of Social Services (CDSS) do not allow county access to their Word versions. DHS and CDSS forms are only available in .pdf format. Mail merging is not possible with Adobe Acrobat documents.

Possible ways to acquire/create a Word MC 210 RV:

- Counties request the state supply a Microsoft Office Word MC 210 RV version;

- Scan the MC 210 RV form and save as a Word document;
- Recreate the MC 210 RV form in Microsoft Word; or
- Copy and paste the .pdf document into Word.

The most efficient solution is to request the Word MC 210 RV version from the DHS and CDSS. An automated process could begin immediately. The other possibilities open counties to the same issues they seek to avoid. A majority of the formatting is lost in scanned and copied versions, requiring manual cleanup increasing the possibility of error. Recreating the MC 210 RV is time-intensive and presents a higher error rate than copying or scanning. Due to increased need for resources, counties must automate the RV packet process to utilize office support staff more effectively.

Manually Tracking Documents

The ability to process, track, and monitor the flow of approximately one thousand documents a day is a challenge for all Call Centers. Before an Eligibility Worker touches a document, six or more clerks have processed it. The list below is not in a universal flow progression, county processes may differ. For example, San Mateo scans and indexes after the Benefit Worker completes the RV. This list is intended to demonstrate the complexity of a clerical process, common to most Call Centers that scan and index after receipt of mail.

After mail is received, it is:

- ▶ Clerk 1: Opened, date stamped, then sorted
- ▶ Clerk 2: Cleared and scanned
- ▶ Clerk 3: Indexed
- ▶ Clerk 4: Filed awaiting assignment
- ▶ Clerk 5: Assigned
- ▶ Clerk 6: Transferred to a case in CalWIN

In San Mateo County, the following process is followed: mail is opened, date stamped, sorted, cleared, delivered or drop filed in the case. Office support then assigns a case to a worker. After the worker completes the RV it is sent to imaging.

At almost every stage of the process, a clerk conducts a clearance on the document, enters case com-

ments in CalWIN and documents the progression in Excel or Access files.

The process is continued after the eligibility worker completes the assigned task. Clerks touch the document at least three times.

- ▶ Clerk 7: Transfers case
- ▶ Clerk 8: Scan additional documents
- ▶ Clerk 9: Indexes additional documents

San Mateo County completes the following process after the worker is finished with the RV; Office support retrieves the case for the worker; clears the case in CalWIN to ensure it is in the appropriate worker number; and sends the case to imaging.

There are two major challenges to a manual workflow: 1) locating and tracking documents throughout the clerical process, and 2) collating documents of the same case to assign as one task. The second challenge may not pertain to all counties. Many counties may not choose to collate documents.

Locating Documents Manually

It is vital for the Call Center staff to be able to locate a document quickly. For example, a hospital or emergency clinic may call the Call Center on behalf of a client. The purpose of the call may necessitate program action. If documents, sent by the client are “in process” but not assigned to a worker, clerical staff must find them. Currently, clerical staff reviews multiple logs to trace or track a document.

Possible Solutions

The tracking and monitoring of documents and tasks could be automated by:

- Purchasing a third party application;
- Creating an in-house application; or
- Using current resources to develop a task management tool.

THIRD PARTY APPLICATION

Strengths: A third party application is the fastest approach to implementing a Task Management Reporting (TMR) tool. After the application is tested for software and network compatibility, end users can begin to utilize the applications functionality.

Challenges: The ability to customize an application to reflect best business practices is limited. Costs may be prohibitive, especially if licenses are required. Training may be necessary for complex applications, and the out-of-box application may not be compatible to existing reporting tools.

IN-HOUSE APPLICATION

Strengths: An in-house application can be customized to a county’s best business practices. Counties control cost and complexity of the application. To some extent, in-house applications can be programmed to interface with existing reporting tools.

Challenges: Planning, programming, and testing new applications are time consuming. It can take a year or more to implement this tool. Depending on complexity, training might be necessary.

USING CURRENT RESOURCES

Strengths: Developing a method to track and monitor tasks using a county’s primary system, CalWIN, would be the optimum option. Contra Costa County formed a Task Management Committee to identify options for developing a tool to track tasks, monitor workflow, and generate management reports. The committee identified basic criteria for a Task Monitoring & Reporting (TMR) tool, which included:

- Demonstrating reporting functionality;
- Provide task counts by type (RV, RC, etc.);
- Demonstrating workflow; and
- Providing task overdue alerts.

Contra Costa County’s Medi-Cal Service Center (MCSC) clerical staff and workers are using CalWIN’s case comments functionality to help track and record document flow. The committee chose to develop a reporting tool based on these CalWIN case comments.⁶

This tool is in the initial stages of development. Specific case comments will be added to the county-maintained “Type of” case comment field in the CalWIN system. Clerical and Eligibility staff will choose an appropriate drop down comment to document an action.

⁶Alana Hogan, System Analyst, Contra Costa County, recommended this option and is developing this tool.

Based on CalWIN case comments, custom reports using CIS data will be generated by Business Object Systems (BOS). Clerical and Eligibility Workers will be able to track documents by status, type of task, worker type, unit, and time frame.

Clerical staff will log document flow in only one place, CalWIN case comments. Tracking and monitoring will be accomplished using custom reports with sorting functionality. Staff should be able to locate any document within minutes.

One of the most important and pressing clerical challenges is to merge or collate received documents to a case. This becomes especially important when trying to collate different documents received on separate days. The goal is to merge these documents and assign them to one worker. Using a task management reporting tool, clerical will be able to clear and track documents quickly and collate documents before worker assignment.

The reporting functionality of TMR will show the flow of a task from receipt through completion using CalWIN case comments. Using the sort feature, staff will be able to identify multiple documents belonging to one case, quickly find the documents, and merge these items together.

Challenges: This tool is in initial development and testing has not begun as of this paper. However, some challenges have been identified and are listed below:

- There is a one-day data delay from CalWIN to CIS.
- If non-MCSC workers transfer the case out of caseload, incomplete tasks will drop off the report. This issue is mitigated by having Call Centers control their banked/worker case transfers.

Additional Recommendations

The last two recommendations of barcoding forms and creating a hybrid job classification would not immediately reduce costs or save clerical time. However, they are ideas worth examining for the future.

BARCODING FORMS

Strengths: To ensure indexing and querying accuracy, add barcodes to county-specific forms. Bar

coded forms could be scanned and indexed to the appropriate category automatically.

Challenges: Scanning software will need updating to read barcodes. State-created forms could not be bar coded. However, mail clerks could add barcodes to state forms using a barcode applicator. Clerical time saved indexing will mitigate additional time needed to add barcode labels.

HYBRID CLERICAL/ELIGIBILITY CLASSIFICATION

Backlogs are a constant challenge in Call Centers. Backlogs delay service to clients causing a cyclical effect on Call Center client calls. For example, the backlog delays case maintenance work. Clients call the Call Center inquiring about their case. Call volumes go up, and customer care workers cannot handle the volume. The volume of calls delays casework causing additional calls from clients. A temporary fix would be to offer workers overtime to work the backlog. However, an unanticipated event, for example a spike in returned RVs, will create a backlog again, repeating the cycle. A more consistent and efficient solution is necessary to make a Call Center service delivery more effective.

Solution: Create a hybrid clerical/eligibility worker classification to take client calls dealing with informational inquiries. Clerical staff with specialized training would process customer care calls not requiring eligibility determination. This would free eligibility workers for more complex work. In addition, clerical staff would have additional promotional opportunities.

Challenges: Unions and management would need to agree on minimum qualifications for the hybrid position. If clerical salary is apportioned to county funds, this solution may not be cost effective for counties. However, costs may be somewhat mitigated by hybrid/clerical workers assisting existing eligibility workers with their workload, thus reducing the demand for additional workers necessary for current Call Center demands.

Conclusion

Counties must find ways to reduce costs to maintain effective service delivery to clients. One approach

is to acknowledge the vital role of clerical staff in a Call Center service delivery model. The next step is to create automated processes for efficient and effective clerical service delivery. To meet the challenges Call Centers create, counties must work together to develop creative and innovative approaches to organizing and managing the Call Center environment.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank Lorena Gonzalez for coordinating my San Mateo BASSC internship. Special gratitude goes to Yvonne Dominguez O'Connell and Leticia Negrete for their hospitality, openness, and creative ideas.